



A STEP INTO THE LIGHT SULEIMAN'S STORY

Like many refugees, Suleiman* fled his home country in north east Africa in fear of his life. Also in common with many others, he made a long and difficult journey to Australia, ultimately to arrive at the doors of Foundation House in Melbourne.

However, though refugee stories may have many aspects in common, Foundation House recognises clients as individuals beyond the circumstances of being a refugee. In Suleiman's case, the difficulties of his journey were compounded by childhood traumas, and issues of gender and sexuality.

Suleiman had a difficult early life. 'I am born like this. My mum, she looks all the time like she understands me,' he said. 'My dad, he's a strong man, a religion man, I have a problem with him. The imam, I have big problems with him.'

When I went to High School, I have phobias, I can't believe people. I go to school, then straight to my home.'

Political and personal persecution intersected when he was a young adult, and police tried to coerce him into reporting on local gay people. 'They say, if everyone know you are gay, you have big problem, you are blacklisted. I said, I can't, I don't have information about this. They said, you are not right, you are bad.'

Political turmoil was also increasing in his home country until he feared for his life. 'I have one friend, he gave me passport, he told me maybe you die, you can't live your life here. He told me to go Cairo, maybe you can save your life.'

He went to Cairo in 2003 and was processed by the UNHCR as a political refugee. He found work with people with disabilities. Life in Cairo was still not easy, though, and he was beaten and robbed more than once. He was threatened with death on three different occasions. He found it even harder to understand this continuing persecution. 'There are more people in Cairo who were gay, wearing clothes of a woman...I think, why [persecute] me? Maybe because I am black. Maybe because I seem weak. I am all the time crying. They take my money, three times they take my phone.'



A STEP INTO THE LIGHT *continued*

He became fearful of going outside. 'I have bad heart, depression, not believe myself, not looking for job.'

Fortunately Suleiman found a sympathetic doctor in Cairo, and with his assistance he came to Australia in 2012.

Though things were better, it has been difficult for Suleiman to find a place where he feels safe and comfortable to settle. Housemates were not necessarily sympathetic. 'They give me a hard time. They say, Africans are not gay! Even if I not tell them I am gay I cannot be myself.'

Suleiman was referred by his doctor to Foundation House last year, and saw Counsellor Advocate Carolyn Wilson. He also had access to a Foundation House psychologist, and to massage and natural therapies.

'Carolyn, she listens to me, give me hopes, solves many problems. One year ago, if I saw people talking, I am thinking, he's talking about me. I have bad dreams.

'It has really changed my life. My bad dreams - 90% gone. Depression, going. Stress, going. My studies - I was always forgetting, can't keep it in my head. Now I save all my information.'

He still has not found a permanent place to stay, and currently shifts around various homeless accommodations. But despite his hardships, he feels more able to cope. 'It is hard to make friends, because I am homeless. But now I have hope. If I have a problem, I can fix this, I am not running away, not crying. My life has changed. I feel like I am born a new person.'

Suleiman wanted to share the importance of talking to someone when you are struggling.

'A doctor, a psychologist can help you with your problems if you give them a chance,' he said. 'If you keep silent, if you do not give him chance, if you stay alone, if you cry, it is not good. If you go step by step, tell him all your suffering, they help you. But if you don't tell, they can't help you.'

'A person has problems, he needs one person to take his hand, from the dark, and he is in the light.'

**not his real name*